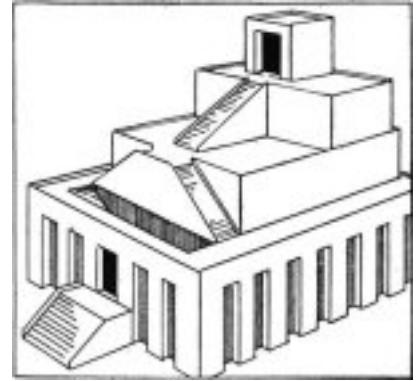


The Sumerian Civilization

By Vickie Chao

Egypt, India, China, and Greece all had very long histories dating back thousands of years. Yet, none of them was as old as the Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia is a triangle-shaped land sandwiched between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Located within the borders of today's Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, this fertile ground was the birthplace of the earliest known civilization on Earth! About 9,000 years ago, people began to take up residence in this area because of its rich soil. Though they had to deal with the scorching heat in summertime and learn to live for months without rainfall, they managed to survive by making the best out of whatever resources they had. To those early settlers, agriculture was their primary livelihood. To be sure that they could plant crops all year round, they dug canals diverting water from the Tigris and the Euphrates for irrigation. At the beginning, their communities were more like small farming villages. But over time, they grew increasingly sophisticated. By 3500 B.C., some of the world's first cities began to emerge in Sumer, the southern region of Mesopotamia. While those cities shared a common culture and spoke the same language, they did not answer to a single leader. As a result, each Sumerian city was an independent state by itself. Each had its own government, its own patron gods and goddesses, and its own king.



Despite their differences, all Sumerian cities were laid out in a similar fashion. At the center of every city, there was always a temple dedicated to its favorite deity. This place of worship, called ziggurat (pronounced "ZIG-oo-rat"), often featured a mud-brick structure with several layers of stepped platforms stacked up to form a terraced pyramid. Topping the building was a shrine, which housed a statue of the city's patron god or goddess. To enter the shrine, the Sumerians built outside staircases and spiral ramps around their ziggurats. In their heyday, ziggurats could have had up to eight stories. But sadly, none of the surviving buildings were preserved to their original height. Today, one of the best-kept ziggurats is at Ur (present-day Tall al-Muqayyar, Iraq). The original building was a three-staged tower dedicated to the moon god Nanna. Over the course of several millennia, its top two layers have disappeared, leaving only its broad, rectangular base (about 200 feet long and 150 feet wide) to remind us of the glorious time it had once enjoyed.

Aside from putting up ziggurats, the Sumerians were also fond of keeping meticulous records. To achieve that, they developed the world's first written language and used it to jot down detailed accounts of their daily lives. (The earliest of its kind, dating back to 3300 B.C., was found in a Sumerian city called Uruk.) At first, the Sumerians' script was in the form of pictures and numbers. But gradually, it was replaced by a system of wedge-shaped strokes, known as the cuneiform. Since paper was yet to be invented at the time, the Sumerians made do with clay tablets. Using reeds or other hard objects as their styluses, they painstakingly pressed one pictographic symbol after another into a soft clay tablet. Each completed work was like a book. It could be for tracking business transactions. It could be for noting a solar eclipse. It could be for prescribing a medical treatment. Or it could be for solving a mathematical problem. In short, thanks to their fanatical writing habit, we were able to gain some insights about what life was like back then. For example, without it, we would have never known that the Sumerians created a 12-month calendar based on the phases of the moon. And without it, we would have never known the precise measurements of a ziggurat.

In the 2300s B.C., the Sumerians were under attack. Their enemies came from a northern city called Akkad or Agade. Led by their king, Sargon, the Akkadians were victorious everywhere they went. In due time, they conquered the entire southern region of Mesopotamia and even established command in areas far beyond it. Sargon's kingdom, encompassing territories from modern-day Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, was one of the world's first great empires. According to the Sumerian king list, Sargon was the founder of the Agade Dynasty. He reigned for 56 years (2334 B.C. - 2279 B.C.)

Upon assuming full control of his kingdom, Sargon introduced the Akkadians' own Semitic language to Sumer. While the new tongue never completely replaced the old one, it did become the common spoken language there.



Later on, the Akkadians learned of the cuneiform that the Sumerians had been using. They made some modifications and came up with a new writing system that was essentially based on the same approach.

After Sargon's death in 2279 B.C., his kingdom began to crumble. Then about seven decades later, it completely ceased to exist as a nomadic tribe called the Gutu invaded the capital city of Agade and brought the Akkadian Empire to its knees. After that disaster, independent city-states began to crop up across Mesopotamia once again. Among the upstarts, the city of Ur had the most influence. Its leader, Ur-Nammu, established the 3rd dynasty of Ur. He was also the very king who built the ziggurat that we can still see at Ur today.

The 3rd dynasty of Ur, in many ways, was a renaissance period for the Sumerian culture. Many scholars believe that the famous epic, Gilgamesh, was penned some time during that era. And it was either Ur-Nammu himself or his successor, Shulgi, who compiled the world's first set of legal codes.

Unfortunately, in spite of their best efforts in restoring Sumer to its former might, the emperors of the 3rd dynasty of Ur were unable to unite Mesopotamia under a single banner. By the time the dynasty collapsed around 2000 B.C., Sumer had long stopped being a political force worthy to be reckoned with. After the Assyrians claimed authority over the northern half and the Babylonians gained control of the southern portion, the Sumerian civilization faded away and became an extinct culture in history.

The Sumerian Civilization

Questions

- _____ 1. Which of the following about Sumer or the Sumerian civilization is true?
- A. The Sumerian civilization was older than the Akkadian civilization.
 - B. Ur-Nammu united all the city-states in Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C.
 - C. The Sumerian script was derived from the Akkadian writing system.
 - D. The first city-state appeared in Mesopotamia about 9,000 years ago.
- _____ 2. Which of the following modern-day countries was NOT part of the Akkadian Empire?
- A. Turkey
 - B. Syria
 - C. Kuwait
 - D. Iran
- _____ 3. Which of the following events took place first?
- A. The Gutians defeated the Akkadian Empire.
 - B. Ur-Nammu commissioned the construction of the ziggurat at Ur.
 - C. The Sumerians developed their own written language.
 - D. Sargon established the Agade Dynasty.
- _____ 4. Which of the following Sumerian achievements is **incorrect**?
- A. The Sumerians created the world's first set of legal codes.
 - B. The Sumerians invented paper.
 - C. The Sumerians built the world's first cities.
 - D. The Sumerians used the phases of the moon to create their calendar.

- _____ 5. Which deity did the ziggurat at Ur honor?
- A. The moon god
 - B. The sun god
 - C. The kitchen god
 - D. The river god
- _____ 6. Who eradicated the Akkadian Empire?
- A. The Assyrians
 - B. The Gutians
 - C. The Babylonians
 - D. The Amorites
- _____ 7. Which of the following about the 3rd dynasty of Ur is true?
- A. It united the entire Mesopotamia in 2334 B.C.
 - B. Its founder was Sargon.
 - C. Its first emperor created the cuneiform.
 - D. It was a renaissance period for the Sumerian civilization.
- _____ 8. Which of the following statements is correct?
- A. The capital of the Akkadian Empire was at Uruk.
 - B. Shulgi was the first emperor of the 3rd dynasty of Ur.
 - C. The Akkadians' language was a Semitic one.
 - D. The Sumerians buried their kings inside ziggurats.

In your opinion, what is the single most important achievement made by the Sumerians? Explain why.

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